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Districts and Circles

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The relationship between Seamus Heaney and the Tollund Man has become virtually metonymic. The widely anthologised poem "The Tollund Man" is generally considered trade-mark Heaney with all its laconic ambivalence and quasi-religious tone. The tentative parallel between past and present outlined in the poem facilitated a more comprehensive assessment of the potential of the motif which was subsequently re-examined and reconsidered, and though the aesthetic aspect remained consistent, Heaney discovered inadequacies in the parallel and concluded his sequence of bog-poems on a tone of resignation. The promise of the original parallel, however, proved tempting to occasion another return to it in a moment of historic significance. The poem "Tollund" was based on the same tentative parallel as "The Tollund Man", reinstating the relation, this time in the form of a peaceful rural world, between Jutland and Northern Ireland with the implicit idea that the sacrifice was perhaps not in vain.

Though Heaney's most recent collection, *District and Circle* takes its title from names in the London underground, wider implications of the title are also possible as several poems of the collection revisit earlier topics or openly allude to poems from Heaney's oeuvre. Among these there is a return to the figure of the Tollund Man, who is resurrected in a sequence of sonnets entitled "The Tollund Man in Springtime." Heaney evokes familiar districts—primarily Jutland, both old and new, the home of the Tollund Man, and by allusion a wider world including his own homeland. The return, yet another one, creates the impression of circles, and as the sonnets constitute a circular structure in their sequence, there appears a Joycean technique at work in the considerably enlarged set of bog-poems.

Heaney's interest in the bog had its first expression in the seminal poem "Bogland", yet the first real and at once typical bog-poem was "The Tollund Man" as it provided the first character in a series of encounters with people from the past. The poem opens with a description of the body embedded in the image of an imaginary pilgrimage to the present location of its remains, and then moves on to a tentative invocation and an even more tentative identification with the experience of the contemplated figure; Heaney uses these latter two sections to negotiate his imaginative parallel between the distant world of the Iron Age community of Jutland and the contemporary society of the Troubles of Northern Ireland. The description of the body follows what was to become the 'classical'

Heaney pattern in the later bog-poems: the body is described in terms of the bog itself, evoking Wordsworthian dimensions of at-one-ness with the surrounding world, and at the same time this technique diminishes the shock of the otherwise explicit reference to the status of the Tollund Man as a victim of a sacrificial cult. The invocation builds on this ennobled image of the figure: the "saint's kept body" (Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966–1987*, 31) becomes the proper figure to address in the hope of a better world beyond the violent conflict of the present. Heaney's persona even suggests a sharing of the experience of the victim during his envisioned pilgrimage, leading him to a rather disquieting conclusion:

> Out there in Jutland
> In the old man-killing parishes
> I will feel lost,
> Unhappy and at home.
> (Heaney, New Selected Poems 1966–1987, 32)

Heaney's gesture in the last section of the poem has drawn doubts concerning the nature of his sharing of the victim's experience. (cf. Parker 108: "Motoring through a foreign country hardly seems a comparable experience […].") However far-fetched the parallel between a sacrificial victim and a leisurely tourist may be, Heaney still has a point: the bold overstatement of the kinship of their feelings leads to the rather disillusioned closure of the poem in which the concept of 'home' is revised along the complicated confines of the conflict-ridden home province of the poet. The paradoxical relation of being at once "lost, / Unhappy and at home" is also indicative of Heaney's stance in relation to the conflict itself as he attempts to stay clear of openly taking sides yet cannot fully ignore his own position as a Northern Catholic, with all his experience of grievances and discrimination.

Heaney returns to the bog-motif in his volume *North* on a larger scale. There is a section in the first part of the collection which creates a myth of the motif with an adequate narrative pattern to it, and this myth is in turn embedded in the myth of the North outlined by the whole of the collection. The section of the bog-poems complements the achievement of "The Tollund Man" by providing a variety of characters who are recruited to sustain the imaginative parallel between the past and the present, yet Heaney is honest enough to acknowledge the limitations of his construct, and in the concluding poem of the section ("Kinship") he takes up the position of the detached observer who has no intention to dignify any further what has become in his eyes the simple and raw fact of murder.

Though *North* provides a gallery of bog-characters, the Tollund Man is missing from the collection. Instead, another victim of the cult is portrayed, yet the Grauballe Man does not receive the same elevated status of the earlier figure: though the initial description is done in similar terms, there is a strong contrast

between the "repose" of the Tollund Man and the horrific sight of the slashed throat of the Grauballe Man. This leads to a more complex evaluation of the figure at the end of the poem as "beauty and atrocity" (Heaney, *North*, 29) are linked to each other in the final moments of contemplation, and this time the Heaney-persona does not hint at any form of shared experience.

Heaney's first return to the Tollund Man, or rather, to his emblematic role was undertaken in the poem "Tollund", published in the volume *The Spirit Level*, well after he seemed to have abandoned the bog-motif. The figure is not explicitly conjured but the allusion to the earlier poem is impossible to miss: the poem is an account of a visit to the place where the Tollund Man was found, and the occasion is of historic significance as the poem is dated "September 1994" (Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 69), making a clear-cut reference to the IRA ceasefire, which effectively brought to an end a 25-year-long period of civil unrest and violence. Writing in 1998, Helen Vendler suggested that "'Tollund' can stand for a poem of Afterwards, marking […] one's response in a post-catastrophic moment" (Vendler 156).

In "The Tollund Man" Heaney's persona promised a pilgrimage to contemplate the remains of the Iron Age man. This promise is fulfilled here yet "Tollund" focuses on the location of the bog where the discovery happened rather than on a visit to a museum with its carefully arranged display of reconstructed history. The place is approached as a location in nature, though the description is proportionately shared between the bog and the altered landscape of country life. There is an eye on the touristic significance of the place too, yet no conflict arises out of this communion of nature and civilisation, the scene is that of near-pastoral harmony.

In contrast with the desperate conditions at the time of writing "The Tollund Man", "Tollund" is characterised by a markedly different atmosphere. The form of the poem also embodies this difference as the leisurely long lines conclude in neat patterns of enclosed rhymes, which is in stark contrast with the narrow, and nearly claustrophobic, drilling-like and unrhymed lines of "The Tollund Man". As the persona's eyes follow the orderly modern world, there is a cataloguing of the landmarks: Heaney makes a list of the items of the modern landscape and this list-like account with its slow movement further contributes to the relaxed atmosphere of the poem. The masterful juxtaposition of the scarecrow and the satellite dish hints at the peaceful reconciliation of old and new, which prepares for the re-establishment of Heaney's earlier parallel between the past of Jutland and the present of his home district through a simple use of place names from the latter. Heaney never ventures farther than this in making his point: the rather low-key sentence "Things had moved on" (Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 69) solves his problem in a majestic way by suggesting a continuity of experience between the world of the Tollund Man and the present in the same location with the implication that fertility has been granted in the long run through the figure of the sacrificial victim. This is as yet only a hope in

relation to Northern Ireland, but the moment of a historic ceasefire is an indication of a possible new world.

The possibility of a new beginning is expressed through an allusion to a passage in Shakespeare, as Heaney explains it, but he provides the borrowed image with his own landmarks too:

> One of the most beautiful passages in Shakespeare has to do with an old belief about the spirit walking abroad after death but having to return to purgatory at dawn when the cocks crow and the light brightens. In the next poem, however, I will revise this superstition and end with an image of ghosts coming back to life, re-entering the light and managing to begin again with a new energy and resolution. (*Stepping Stones*, comment preceding the poem "Tollund")

Something of the ambivalence of the conclusion of "The Tollund Man" survives into this poem as the "Hallucinatory and familiar" nature of the experience is described at the beginning of the poem and as paradoxical phrases indicate the persona's stance at the end: "it was user-friendly outback / Where we stood footloose, at home beyond the tribe" (Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 69). The new beginning is one without earlier constraints though not without previous experience—this is indicated by the final stanza of the poem:

> More scouts than strangers, ghosts who'd walked abroad
> Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning
> And make a go of it, alive and sinning,
> Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad. (ibid)

Though the figure of the Tollund Man does not appear in the poem, it is *apropos* the figure itself that the location acquires significance. The place would possess little power if it were not for the man, and it is exactly this imaginative appeal lent to the location by the human figure that Heaney deliberately exploits in the chosen moment. The same deliberate effort was not present at the writing of the first poem as Heaney claims:

> The Tollund Man seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside. I felt very close to this. And the sacrificial element, the territorial religious element, the whole mythological field surrounding these images was very potent. So I tried, not explicitly, to make a connection between the sacrificial, ritual, religious element in the violence of contemporary Ireland and this terrible sacrificial religious thing in *The Bog People*. This wasn't thought out. It began with a genuinely magnetic, almost entranced relationship with those heads. … And when I wrote that poem ('The Tollund Man') I had the

> sense of crossing a line really, that my whole being was involved in the sense of—the root sense—of religion, being bonded to something, being bound to do something. I felt it a vow; I felt my whole being caught in this. (Heaney quoted by Kirkland 258–9)

With the second poem, however, Heaney could safely build on a foundation which has been tested (though not unequivocally shared by every member of the audience), and there is a self-conscious literary foundation for the later poem beyond Shakespeare:

> […] ["Tollund"] was written after the IRA ceasefire of August 1994. The Sunday after that historic Wednesday I just happened to be for the first time in this bog in Jutland where they had found the body of the Tollund Man about whom I'd written about 24 years earlier. The mood of this more recent poem is as different from the earlier one as the dark mood of the early 1970s in Ulster was from the more sanguine mid '90s. (*Stepping Stones*, comment preceding the poem "Tollund")

The bog-poems of *North* represented a resurrection of the motif and considerably widened the circle of its characters yet they did not involve the Tollund Man. Heaney's latest collection, however, finds an occasion for the figure to come to life again and Heaney is generous enough to endow the figure with life and even a voice, so that it can recount experience from a personal perspective. As Heaney himself explains it,

> […] in a new start that was both unexpected and exhilarating, I returned to a figure who had given me rare poetic strength more than 30 years earlier. I began a sequence of sonnets in the voice of the Tollund Man; this Iron Age revenant was, as they used to say in stage directions, 'discovered' in a new setting, keeping step with me in the world of surveillance cameras and closed-circuit TV, of greenhouse gases and acid rain. He functioned as a kind of guardian other, risen out of the Jutland bog to 'gather / From the display-case peat his staying powers'. The convention is to call such a figure a 'persona' but in this case he felt more like a transfusion […] (Heaney, *The Times*, March 25, 2006)

"The Tollund Man in Springtime" is a sequence of sonnets. Heaney opts for the form for its inherent system of balance and dynamism, for its subtle organisation of its parts towards constructing a whole which is at once more than the sum of its components. Heaney, however, seems to prefer the more organic romantic version of the sonnet rather than the traditional Renaissance structure with its neat division into easily identifiable units. The closure of the last sonnet is linked with the beginning of the first one, which creates a circular structure in the

sequence: the figure has to be resurrected first to be able to recount the story of his resurrection.

The first of the sonnets outlines the context of the revival of the figure, dropping him into the contemporary world. Heaney employs the Future Perfect to indicate the coming to a new life of the figure, and the modern world is quickly evoked through an imagery of "scans, screens, hidden eyes" (Heaney, *District and Circle*, 55). The status of the figure, however, remains something of a mystery, self-definition stops short as he is "neither god nor ghost, / Not at odds or at one" (ibid). The only concrete elements mentioned are those of the bog, with its unique communion of "seeding grass" and "Dead bracken" (ibid), reminiscent of the basic cycle of the natural world. This builds a contrast between the temporal world of the bog and the timeless figure of the speaker as the former is adequately defined by its elements whereas the latter is stranded in the act of interpreting himself.

The resurrected figure has drawn energies from his 'dormant' state according to his own claims: "I reawoke to revel in the spirit / They strengthened when they chose to put me down / For their own good" (Heaney, *District and Circle*, 55). The resurrection runs parallel with an understanding and an act of forgiveness towards the event of his sacrifice, which is in concord with Heaney's observation of the "repose" of the character in "The Tollund Man". The past indeed is closed down, and the changed surroundings provide a different kind of threat for the figure, "a sixth-sensed threat" (ibid) of the modern world, "Clear alteration in the bog-pooled rain" (ibid). Alteration works on multiple levels as the normally short-term literal change from night to day becomes a far-reaching metaphorical one for the figure, and the whole world surrounding the bog has also undergone a profound change since the Tollund Man last contemplated it.

In the second poem the main resource of the bog, peat is explored, and the self-definition of the Tollund Man is complemented by this element. Peat is the proto-form of coal, a rather meagre source of energy which is "Ashless, flameless, its very smoke a sullen / Waft of swamp-breath" (Heaney, *District and Circle*, 55) as it never fully loses its water content even if it is left to dry in the sun for a long time. The Tollund Man 'enjoyed' a communion with this substance until his discovery, yet the approach to the figure in terms of this material is a new element in his description. The moment of discovery is seen in religious terms borrowed from Christianity: the "unrisen" figure comes to light when "the levered sod / Got lifted up" (ibid), and as a result, the Tollund Man is resituated in the Christian universe as a creation specifically placed in the bog:

> […]; then once I felt the air
> I was like turned turf in the breath of God,
> Bog-bodied on the sixth day, brown and bare,
> And on the last, all told, unatrophied. (ibid)

With the allusion to the Creation the Tollund Man is safely established in his own private mythology which is reconciled with Christianity.

The third poem offers a catalogue of the body of the Tollund Man, or rather, of what has remained of it. It is only the head which is still displayed in a museum as the rest of the body was sacrificed to scientific investigations, and the description focuses on this item as it is carefully arranged on display. The verbless list of the parts and features of the head contrasts with the past tense of the "phantom head / And arm and leg and shoulder" (Heaney, *District and Circle*, 56) which also hints at the long period between the burial of the victim and the discovery of his remains. That long period was one with a mutual relation between the body and its surroundings: it was a time "when the bog pith weighed / To mould me to itself and it to me" (ibid), which is at once a self-reflexive commentary on Heaney's use of the figure and the whole bog-myth as it suggests the evolution of the motif in Heaney's sequence on the bog people. There is an allusion to the poem "The Tollund Man" too: the invocation of the poem is recalled as "Faith placed in me" (ibid), and the reference to the head being "On show for years while all that lay in wait / Still waited" (ibid) echoes the relation of "The Tollund Man" to "Tollund".

The paradoxical idea of faith placed in the man while he was faithless as a sacrificial victim at first and a museum item later finds its analogue in the image of "a stone / The harrow turned up when the crop was sown" (ibid). The accidental discovery is at once an act of unsettling, and this evokes Yeats and his stone that troubles the living stream—and indeed the victims of the contemporary violence create their own 'troubles' for the living, and tentatively they also function as the Yeatsean stone, with all its ambiguity: the stone unsettles the course of the stream yet it is also what shocks it out of its inertia and gives it a new direction. The invocation to the Tollund Man, blasphemous as it may have been, served exactly the same purpose: by evading the direct confrontation of the contemporary world, it launched a course of profound enquiry into the nature of violence related to religion and territory.

This richly evocative section is concluded by a relaxed yet enigmatic pair of lines: "Out in the Danish night I'd hear soft wind / And remember moony water in a rut" (ibid). Neither time nor space is satisfactorily specified—the past habitual "would" does not make it clear whether it happened before the discovery or between that and the present reawakening of the figure, and similarly the "out in the Danish night" is vague enough to create a sense of ambiguity. The peaceful associations of the experience, however, are clear and they further strengthen the intertextual relation of the present poem with the earlier ones.

The fourth sonnet of the sequence concentrates on the Tollund Man's reconstruction of himself. The museum item enacts a process of re-creation in a rather ingenious way: the reconstruction is a tentative rejuvenation course based purely on the power of the word. The self-empowered *logos* ushers in the return of sensation: seeing, hearing and smelling are all recovered not only to revive

the Tollund Man but also to relocate him in Heaney's usual poetic world which is dominated by a rich combination of these sensory fields.

The newly rejuvenated figure sets out on a course of learning. His education is conducted by an observation of cattle in the rain: it is "their knowledgeable / Solid standing and readiness to wait" (Heaney, *District and Circle*, 57) which provides the example with a strong emphasis on the element of patience and accompanying wisdom. Contemplation uncovers previous experience: "Of another world, unlearnable, and so / To be lived by, whatever it was I knew / Came back to me" (ibid). The lived but so far not contemplated and interpreted experience returns, yet it is at odds with the present of "check-out lines" and "cash-points" (ibid), thus the figure appears as a strange bystander, as "Bulrush, head in air, far from its lough" (ibid).

Despite modern techniques and equipment the Tollund Man manages to preserve a secret of his own, corresponding to his mental separation from the present. "Through every check and scan I carried with me / A bunch of Tollund rushes" (Heaney, *District and Circle*, 57): by carrying pollen on his skin the figure steals something out of his old world and into the new, driven by the hope of bringing it back to life again, yet it eludes him: "I had hoped they'd stay / Damp until transplanted," but "they went musty" (ibid). The recognition leaves the figure with a dilemma as to the possibility of continuity which becomes resonant with self-reflexive considerations on the part of the poet too:

> Dust in my palm
> And in my nostrils dust, should I shake it off
> Or mix it in with spit in pollen's name
> And my own? (ibid)

The resolution, however, is quickly made, and in another instance of self-reflexive allusion the figure decides in favour of giving it a try: "As a man would, cutting turf, / I straightened, spat on my hands, felt benefit / And spirited myself into the street" (ibid). This resolution also includes a reference to the first sonnet of the sequence ("Into your virtual city I'll have passed"), thus the circle is made full at the end of the last poem: the Tollund Man has been resurrected and now he can recount his resurrection.

The dilemma of the Tollund Man is on one level that of continuity, shared by Heaney himself. The question whether an imaginative parallel can be drawn between Iron Age Jutland and modern Northern Ireland is asked by the poem "The Tollund Man", yet it is only partly answered by it, thus Heaney makes a return to the motif. This in itself is another instance of the dilemma, and so is the latest revisiting of the topic through the resurrection of the Tollund Man in the new sequence. The choice of the poet to involve the figure once again implies his conviction that his initial idea was potent but at the same time it admits the persistence of his doubts concerning its validity, and the new approach to the

figure, though it generously avoids explicit references to the violent cult of the past, serves as a reinforcement of the imaginative power of the Tollund Man. The allusion to the turf-cutter, a possible reference to the grandfather of the poet as evoked in the poem "Digging" suggests a similar drive to strengthen the belief in the possibility of continuity despite a radical presence of discontinuity between the occupations of the family members of different generations, and in this way another circle is closed and thus made full—at least for the time being.

The poem "The Tollund Man" employed the framework of an imaginary pilgrimage, a promise for the future emerging from a finding from the past. The figure is excavated yet this does not correspond to a resurrection, and it is exclusively the observing speaker who governs the poem. "Tollund" depicts a world in the time of late summer and early autumn, a world at the height of its powers in which nothing is explicitly reminiscent of sacrifice. It is only through the significance Heaney attributes to the place that the past is evoked and the figure looms in the imaginative background. "The Tollund Man in Springtime" functions then both as the 'missing link' as well as a new beginning. The poem brings the old association of rebirth yet the title is also a reminder of spring as a part of the regular cycle, a recurring element rather than a peculiar one. Still, the revival of the figure is a unique occasion and Heaney is cunning enough to exclude references to the regular recurrence of the cycle itself.

Some of the reviewers of *District and Circle* question the wisdom and purpose of returning to the figure, seeing no real advancement in comparison with the earlier poems (cf. Wooten; Wheatley). Yet it is part of the traditional Heaney tactics of self-enquiry, self-testing and necessary revision. This drive occasions returns to earlier motifs and themes in his poetry, thus it is an act of complementation, of making the circle full, which is regularly practiced by Heaney. Speaking about the aestheticisation of the bog bodies, Helen Vendler raises the question: "What would the corpse himself say posthumously about his own state?" (Vendler 45) With "The Tollund Man in Springtime" Heaney answers this question in a comprehensive way, moreover, he compels his subject to face not only himself but an altered world as well. The overwhelmingly different environment into which the Tollund Man steps still leaves some space for him to contemplate himself and this leads to the humanisation of the figure—he is no longer a museum item, a curious memorial of the past but there opens about him a genuinely human dimension, however limited that may be.

The resurrection of the figure has yet another dimension in relation to the previous elements of the motif. "Bog Queen" in *North* resurrected the goddess of the Iron Age cult, though the long waiting of the goddess did not pass without the process of disintegration (cf. Vendler 45). The reawakening of the remains of the Tollund Man is carried out through a similar process, thus the coming to life of the figure now provides what appears to be a fitting bridegroom to the goddess: as he was in his death, so he will be in his new life—bridegroom to the goddess in winter and a revived bridegroom to the revived goddess in spring.

The symbolic sacrifice is now balanced by a symbolic resurrection, and yet another circle is completed.

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